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AUTHOR Di Donato, Robert
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ABSTRACT

The rapid changes occurring in foreign language teaching in recent years present substantial challenges for language teachers. While they welcome new methods, techniques, and approaches, they are confronted with sometimes conflicting needs and external pressures. Language teachers are actively involved in improving both their own training and the image of foreign languages. Current scrutiny of the teaching profession as a whole is even more intense for the language teaching profession, and a proliferation of new methods, techniques, and approaches has produced mixed results. Insecurity regarding instructional techniques has resulted, but clinging to traditional techniques will not be pedagogically successful. Teachers must adopt an internal mechanism to guide them through innovations and enable them to choose what is appropriate for their instructional situation. Teachers need to incorporate practical results of research into their teaching, but also not neglect intuition in formulating methods and practices. Motivation studies indicate that functional language use is the objective of most foreign language learners. This implies a rethinking of traditional approaches and sequencing of textbook materials, and supports increased use of authentic materials. Language teachers need to develop an attitude of reflection on their own teaching, which will manifest itself in renewed self-assurance, confidence, and awareness. (MSE)

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The Foreign Language Teacher: Confronting an Ever-Changing Profession[1]

Robert Di Donato
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Introduction

The rapid changes occurring in the foreign language teaching profession in recent years have caught many teachers by surprise. On the one hand, they welcome the new methods, techniques and approaches which are proliferating at an ever-increasing rate. On the other, they feel somewhat trapped between "doing things the old way" and the constant urgings of the profession to enhance and update their teaching methods. Existing programs and materials are continually being reviewed, analyzed and updated. Constant attempts are made to keep teachers abreast of current issues and trends as well as to acquaint them with the most recent theories in FL teaching and introduce them to new strategies. Today FL teachers are faced with many new approaches and recommendations which they must weigh, consider and possibly implement.[2] Confronted with the adoption of state syllabi, matters of professionalization and new directions in their field, the question is often heard: how is the FL teacher to cope with the ever-changing state of the profession? This discussion will address a number of key issues of concern to FL teachers today and will present some practical suggestions for dealing with them.

[1]This is an adaptation of a keynote address given at the Southern Conference on Language Teaching (SCOLT) in November, 1986.

[2]Both the Carnegie and Holmes Reports call for substantial change in teacher education. See: *A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century*. Report of the Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession. New York: Carnegie Corporation, 1986, and *Tomorrow's Teachers*. Report of the Holmes Group. East Lansing, 1986.

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FL Teachers: Committed and Involved

A closer look at teachers' efforts to keep abreast of the FL teaching profession reveals that they are indeed active and involved. They are eager to improve their own training and performance through attendance at in-service workshops, seminars and conferences as well as through professional journals and other aids. They are implementing new ideas and techniques acquired through various sources and are sharing them. The renewed interest in foreign languages nationwide and the increase in enrollments is further evidence that teachers are motivating students to pursue FL study. Teachers are actively involved in image-building for foreign languages.

In terms of public relations, FL teachers are reaching out to their communities to instill in them an awareness of the importance of foreign languages in our interdependent world. They are engaging themselves politically in the cause of foreign languages by forming task forces on a local level to assess teachers' needs and are developing strategies to meet those needs. Together with their students, teachers are conducting a variety of projects designed to appeal to community interest.

The Challenge of Teaching

In the past several years the teaching profession has again become the object of intense scrutiny. This is not unusual, to say the least. A thorough analysis and evaluation followed by suggestions for reshaping and restructuring teacher education inevitably ensues. For a brief period of time, critics assail students' basic skills, their test scores, the way teachers conduct their classes, the issue of student motivation and a host of other questions. Problem-solving groups put their collective minds to work to formulate solutions to what is commonly referred to as the catastrophic state of teaching and the classroom in general. Their solutions are generally short-lived, due in part to the attempt at fixing with a band-aid what needs deep structural change and sweeping reform. Rather than considering the broader aspect of the role of foreign languages in American society, critics focus only on FL instruction in the schools. As a result, some change does occur, and this change is not necessarily negative. It reflects a process of constant analysis and evaluation. Even though input is sought to a certain extent from FL professionals, what remains problematic in such assessments is

that they are imposed from the outside. While such studies eventually produce some positive results, they often carry with them a demoralizing influence on teachers. FL educators feel that critics of the system are on the attack and they must mobilize and react in some way. The teaching profession is probably one of, if not *the* most studied, evaluated, analyzed, scrutinized and criticized endeavors on earth. But in spite of the criticism, FL teachers survive, they persist, they are strengthened.

The day-to-day challenge of teaching forces the FL educator to face a number of obstacles both in and outside the classroom: varying degrees of support for foreign languages by administrators at all levels, general lack of support for the humanities across the country, including parents who fail to recognize the importance of these subject areas for their children, the obsession with making "big bucks" in which the humanities seem to have little or no place, dealing with bureaucratic hassles on a continual basis, and the routine of teaching the same courses over and over year after year in the same way. Add to these influences the new impulses in FL education today with all their accompanying change and upheaval, and it is easy to understand why teachers sometimes lose sight of the goals they once espoused. The move away from grammar-driven language instruction and the push toward proficiency-oriented FL teaching and learning, which has sought to "focus" what is now going on in the classroom and direct it along more communicatives lines, have also put greater demands on both teachers and students. Classroom time is devoted much more to student talk rather than teacher talk with the instructor serving as a model and facilitator, maintaining the language-learning environment for the students. The student, too, is gaining a greater degree of self-sufficiency as a learner. Although this scenario cannot be designated as a reversal of the traditional teacher-student role, it can be viewed as a balancing of the two, with students accepting more and more of the responsibility for their own learning. Since more teachers are now using pair and group work, are involving students with more authentic texts and other materials and are integrating video and computer technology to a greater degree, the FL learning environment has indeed changed. And this change has brought about some insecurity on the part of FL teachers.

In recent years this feeling of insecurity has become somewhat intensified due in part to the growing emphasis on student motivation. It is assumed that if teachers perform well in the classroom, their students will automatically follow suit. We know, however, that it is not the simple introduction of new methods and techniques that motivates

students to, first of all, study foreign language, and then to work harder and achieve greater proficiency. In the same way, it is not simply the introduction of new methods, approaches, and techniques that motivates teachers to teach better, become more expert in their subject areas, and, in general, improve their skills. The plethora of methods, techniques, and approaches that has flooded the market since the late 1950's when interest in foreign languages spiraled has, in a sense, produced mixed results. On the one hand, they have led to better-planned teaching and learning methods. On the other hand, they have created in teachers a sense of insecurity with regard to their instructional techniques because they call into question what educators have been doing in the classroom. The insecurity that results, however, cannot always be seen in a negative light. In fact, it is often insecurity that prompts teachers to seek new avenues in methodology, to refine their approaches, and to implement, on as large a scale as possible, that which effectively produces results.

Clinging to approaches and strategies which have been in use year after year will not combat their insecurity. In order to do so, teachers must develop within themselves a mechanism which will guide them through the various pedagogical innovations and enable them to choose what is appropriate for their instructional situation. This process begins at the very basic level of the textbook and course syllabus and proceeds throughout the curriculum. Rather than looking outside themselves for this guide in the form of mandates or semi-mandates from the state, the profession or the school district, teachers can look within themselves, trust their knowledge, background and training, and, with the help of the state, the profession, and the school district, arrive at guidelines, curriculum, and teaching strategies which are meaningful for their particular situation. Attempts to standardize the teaching and learning of foreign languages have, in a sense, removed this responsibility from teachers. They sometimes feel that they must adhere to a set of dictates and guidelines and can exercise little or no control over curricular structure and organization. Their lament is no longer: "I have to finish the book." It is now: "It's in the syllabus and I have to cover it." Caught in the squeeze between the expectations of the state or school district and the array of approaches and techniques advanced by the profession, they sometimes function in substitution-drill fashion, trying to complete the sentence: "..... will motivate my students," and completing the statement with: The Communicative Approach, Suggestopedia, The Natural Approach, TPR, etc. The seemingly overwhelming number of choices provided by the profession can have a

discouraging effect on teachers. Accustomed to their own style and instructional mode, they are often uncertain as to how to adapt suggestions and recommendations to suit their purposes. Rather than enriching teacher creativity, the wide array of choices can have the opposite effect: teachers become disillusioned because they feel they are unable to keep up with the profession. It is time for FL teachers to develop a new attitude toward their own instruction and the profession in general, one that will enable them to maintain their own style and sense of self, and, at the same time, enhance their teaching by utilizing the results of research in the most effective way possible.

A New Attitude and New Directions:

Teachers tend to look upon teaching as an exact science, primarily because it involves so much responsibility and accountability. They attempt to measure teacher effectiveness in terms which are as specific as possible. But in the thousands of studies done on this topic, none has been able to isolate and define the elusive variable of teacher personality. When the main character in a Broadway show was asked the question: "What is reality anyway?" she replied, "Nothing but a collective hunch." Teachers often pose the question: "What makes a good FL class anyway?" For many the answer might be: "Nothing but a collective hunch."[3] If learning a language involves making mistakes and learning from them, then teaching one certainly must involve similar processes. Much of what teachers do in the classroom is based on hunches. However, these "inspirations" do not grow out of thin air. They are rooted in years of experience, in drawing analogies for other disciplines and in learning from other sources. When developing curriculum as well as individual lessons, teachers do indeed incorporate the practical results of research studies and experiments into their instruction, but they should also not neglect hunches and intuition in their planning. Ideally, a combination of the two in formulating methods and practices should yield the best results.

Developing a new attitude toward our profession implies a step-by-step rethinking of what we as FL teachers do in the classroom. To avoid being overwhelmed by new directions in the field, teachers must

[3]The Broadway show referred to here is "The Search for Intelligent Signs of Life in the Universe."

first analyze their own teaching situation, assess what needs to be changed and then decide on a plan of action as to how to modify it. Teachers are not expected to simply discard approaches they have been using up to now, but may be called upon to implement new ideas and techniques which are designed to achieve curricular objectives and which can readily be integrated into their own teaching philosophies. Innovative approaches will be of little use to teachers who have not fully pondered the implications of such ideas for their own instructional setting. To illustrate their point, let us consider three important directions in FL teaching today: increased attention to functional use of language, a rethinking of the role of grammar and the integration of authentic materials into classroom instruction.

Motivational studies and student opinion polls indicate that most students study a foreign language because they want to be able to speak it, it is imperative that students learn how to communicate. Functional use of the language means that the learner will be able to use it in a variety of contexts and situations. It implies that the student will not only acquire vocabulary and grammar, but also socio-linguistic discourse and strategic competence in the language. If students understand the purpose for which language is used, they will be better able to focus their linguistic competence to achieve that purpose. Some of the purposes or functions of language, as they are called, include inviting someone to do something, recommending a course of action to a person and accepting or rejecting a suggestion. The vocabulary, grammar, cultural knowledge and interactive competence the student has acquired are all components which contribute to the expression of these language functions. With respect to the FL curriculum, teachers must first decide which language functions are most important for their students and then incorporate them in various contexts and situations with appropriate cultural references into their planning.[4] Functional knowledge of the language constitutes only one of several goals of language instruction. Factors such as aesthetic appreciation of language *per se* or cultural competence in the language should not be neglected.

[4]In a study at Purdue University Linda Harlow et al. surveyed students in French classes to determine notions to be studied in a course and the functions within these notions they considered most important. Linda L. Harlow, W. Flint Smith, and Alan Garfinkel, "Student-Perceived Communication Needs: Infrastructure of the Functional Notional Syllabus," *Foreign Language Annals* 13 (1980).

Increased emphasis on functional use of language automatically implies a rethinking of traditional approaches to grammar. Rather than making grammar the focus of instruction, as is done in a linear approach to grammar instruction, teachers should emphasize real communication in the language. Grammar thus becomes a support for communication rather than an end in itself. An example for the first week of a beginning German class will serve as an illustration. By that point students will have been introduced to several forms of the present tense of the verb "sein" (to be) and a number of useful cognates or loan words, mostly adjectives: "optimistisch" (optimistic), "tolerant" (tolerant) and "intelligent" (intelligent). They will also have become acquainted with one another to a degree and can be asked to pay one another a compliment in German. Using the second person singular and "sein" and the adjectives, students might compliment one another in the following manner: "Du bist optimistisch" (You are optimistic), "Du bist tolerant" (You are tolerant). These utterances can also be descriptive statements about the individuals and thus fulfill another language function, that of describing people. It should be noted that even though the present tense of the verb "to be" is required for this simple activity, only the familiar singular form of address is expressed. The other forms of the verb can be postponed for a future lesson.

Galloway recommends considering stages of acquisition when rethinking the presentation of grammar:[5]

> Receptive control—learners can recognize the structure but are not necessarily able to produce it;
> Partial control—learners can use the structure to a limited degree;
> Full control—learners have facility with the structure in a variety of contexts

Such an approach to grammar also requires that teachers rethink the sequencing of textbook materials. The language functions they choose to emphasize will involve different elements of grammar and will require teaching these grammatical structures in non-linear fashion. With regard

[5]Vicki Galloway, "From Defining to Developing Proficiency: A Look at the Decisions," in Heidi Byrnes and Michael Canale eds., *Defining and Developing Proficiency*. ACTFL Foreign Language Education Series. Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Co., 1986, p. 59.

to the grammar items themselves, teachers should consider three questions:[6]

> Do I need to teach the entire structure?
> Can I postpone parts of it to a later date?
> Is the structure a high-frequency item?

This type of approach toward grammar will help to streamline students' acquisition of structures and avoid overwhelming them now with structures they might only need at some time in the future.

A third important feature of FL instruction today is the increased use of authentic materials. For years teachers have incorporated realia from the target country into their classes, often relying on such materials as illustrations or examples of cultural references made in the textbook. Whether or not these realia have been used to their fullest potential in the instructional process has been left up to the individual teacher. Whereas in the past authentic materials have been edited for classroom use, the trend now is to use such materials in their unaltered state. Omaggio, for example, recommends providing "...enough extralinguistic cues to render unedited authentic materials comprehensible to the student at the Novice or Intermediate level" and further suggests some guidelines for teachers in preparing unedited authentic materials.[7] Besides providing some assistance for students when dealing with materials beyond their competence, teachers can structure exercises and develop activities which only require students to demonstrate comprehension of particular features. One of the major advantages of incorporating authentic materials into language instruction lies in the fact that they are replete with cultural implications. They present information about the target country embedded in a cultural context. Both the information and the context can be exploited by the language learner. The German telephone book provides an excellent illustration of this principle. Students may use the phone book to practice numbers in role-play situations. At the same time, they become acquainted with its many uses, which include obtaining information on train schedules, sports, weather, recipes,

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[6]Adapted from Galloway, p. 61.

[7]Omaggio, Alice, "The Proficiency-Oriented Classroom," in Theodore V. Higgs, ed. *Teaching for Proficiency, the Organizing Principle*. ACTFL Foreign Language Education Series. Lincolnwood, IL: National Textbook Co., 1985, p. 72.

theater and concert offerings, the time, etc. The German telephone book also includes such information as occupations of the persons listed.[8]

Authentic materials in the form of readings, cassettes and videos can form the core of the lesson or can be used to supplement the topic under study. They provide an excellent opportunity for students to gain a variety of perspectives on various themes. For example, if students are learning about the role of television in the Federal Republic of Germany, the teacher might choose to supplement the unit with the following materials: a page from the TV guide (available in most major magazines such as "Der Spiegel"), an interview, either in written form or on cassette, with several individuals regarding their TV watching habits, and perhaps a short selection of programming on video. One suggestion might be to edit a number of television programs for viewing in the language lab, concentrating on such items as news reports, commercials, interviews, a "Krimi" (detective story) and a variety show. A three-to five-minute segment from each would give students the flavor of an evening of television viewing in the Federal Republic. Each of these materials may, of course, be incorporated independently from the textbook and the teacher can design exercises and activities to accompany them. When used in conjunction with the textbook, however, they can give students further insights into the topic and can eventually form the basis for homework activities or class projects. Depending on availability of materials, authentic realia can be integrated into the FL class in a variety of formats based on student interest, curricular goals and teachers' creative energies.

Conclusion

Teachers are eager to implement innovative ideas and techniques in their FL classes. Upon returning from conferences and in-service sessions, they are invigorated by what they have experienced and learned. Professional literature on teaching methodology abounds with suggestions to help them improve their teaching. Choosing what is appropriate for their instructional setting requires that teachers adopt an attitude of reflection toward their own teaching, toward the ever-

[8]For a further discussion of use of the telephone book in language instruction, see: John F. Lalande II, "Making a Connection: Telephone Books, Culture and Language Instruction," *Unterrichtspraxis* 2 (1985).

increasing number of new techniques and approaches and toward the FL profession as a whole. They must rely on their own training and informed judgment in their endeavor. This idea is not radically new. It was brought forth during the 1970's, culminating in a special issue of *Foreign Language Annals* on FL Teacher Education.[9] For teachers part of this new attitude will manifest itself in renewed self assurance and greater confidence in their ability to assess and evaluate developments in the profession which affect them. On a personal and professional level this attitude will be demonstrated in a greater awareness of teachers' individual roles and contributions to teaching. In the FL class it will be evident in their renewed interest in and creative attitude toward curriculum, course content, lesson planning and course structure. It will spill over into instructional practices such as communicative activities, listening experiences, approaches to grammar, reading and writing strategies, classroom grouping techniques, testing formats and grading. Through this new attitude teachers will listen and read, they will be informed by the profession, they will analyze their own teaching circumstances, and they will adapt and modify approaches and techniques to suit their needs and those of their students. But above all, they will rely on themselves, on their expertise and training. They will assume control in managing and directing their students' learning. Will they make mistakes? Of course, they will! But the percent of error transfer will be minimal and the risk will be worth it.

[9]See the issue on "Teacher Education and Supervision," *Foreign Language Annals*, 1977.